

How many men of color from Massachusetts fought in the American Revolution? How many were free? How many were enslaved?

Analysis

Between 1775 and 1783, *approximately 2,100 men of color* from Massachusetts served with patriot forces in the American Revolution. Due to the limitations of eighteenth-century manuscript records, this total represents a conservative estimate that in all likelihood will be revised upwards with further research.¹

This estimated total suggests that a significant portion of African and Indian population of eighteenth-century Massachusetts served in the military during the American Revolution. Provincial population estimates and census returns indicate that the number of African people in Massachusetts stood at approximately 5,000 individuals between 1765 and 1776. Using similar sources, historians have calculated the Indian population in Massachusetts at roughly 1,700 people at the start of the American Revolution. Out of a combined population of roughly 7,000 individuals in Massachusetts, more than one quarter can be documented as having served in the American Revolution.²

An estimate of 2,100 soldiers of color from Massachusetts also suggests that some revision to the accepted estimates of the total number of African and Native soldiers serving in the American Revolution might be necessary. The most commonly accepted total for the number of black participants from all states serving with patriot forces during the Revolutionary War is approximately 5,000 individuals. This total is a very rough estimate drawn from Benjamin Quarles's pioneering study, *The Negro in the American Revolution*. Writing in 1961, Quarles acknowledged the challenge historians faced when trying to arrive at an accurate total. He very bluntly stated, "It is not possible to give accurate figures as to the number of blacks in the American armies." He went on to lay out the difficulty inherent in answering this questions as follows: "Not more than a third of the Negroes who bore arms were racially labeled; moreover, colored combatants were interspersed with whites in what today might be called unsegregated units." Quarles concluded that an estimate of 5,000 African soldiers serving with colonial forces was "a respectable figure." In general, historians have adopted this figure as a benchmark for estimating black participation in the American Revolution and continue to cite Quarles's figures to this day.³

¹ Note that throughout this time period, Maine was part of Massachusetts. Thus, soldiers of color from what is today the state of Maine are included in all totals and estimates. Separating out Maine and Massachusetts soldiers would prove problematic due to the fact that eighteenth-century military records did not always list what town a soldier originated in, as well as the fact that soldiers were often hired by other towns to enlist.

² For African population in Massachusetts, see the 1765 provincial census province, transcribed and printed in J.H. Benton, jr., *Early Census Making in Massachusetts, 1643-1765...* (Boston, Charles E. Goodspeed, 1905) and the totals from 1776 in Evarts Boutell Greene and Virginia D. Harrington, *American Population Before the Federal Census of 1790* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1932), p. 30. For figures on Indian population, see Benton, Greene & Harrington, and Daniel R. Mandell, *Behind the Frontier: Indians in Eighteenth-Century Eastern Massachusetts* (Lincoln: University of Nebraska Press, 1996).

³ Benjamin Quarles, *The Negro in the American Revolution* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 1961), ix. Quarles drew his estimate from Herbert Aptheker's pamphlet *The Negro in the American Revolution* (New York: International Publishers, 1940). For recent acceptance of this number, see Gary B. Nash, *The*

One recent study proposing a revision of this total is that undertaken by the Daughters of the American Revolution. The resulting publication, *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War*, provides a revised estimate of approximately 6,600 soldiers of color from all states serving with patriot forces. The compilers of *Forgotten Patriots* strove to document only those soldiers physically described as African or Indian or for whom there is strong supporting evidence that. Still, the authors admit that there can be “no firm answer” to the question of minority participation in the American Revolution and indicate that the evidence presented in *Forgotten Patriots* is good indication that the true total should be much higher.⁴

Regardless of this debate, the revised totals offered in *Forgotten Patriots* indicate that Massachusetts provided more soldiers of color to the patriot cause than any other state, and that African and Indian soldiers from the Bay State may represent as many as one quarter of all the soldiers of color fighting with colonial forces between 1775 and 1783.

Unfortunately, it is not currently possible to assemble any sort of estimate respecting the number of enslaved versus free soldiers of color. But the following generalizations can be made: first, both enslaved and free men of color from Massachusetts fought in the American Revolution. Second, enslaved soldiers probably outnumbered free soldiers of color for the simple reason that there were more enslaved people of color in Massachusetts than there were free.⁵

Methodology

The approximate figure of 2,100 soldiers of color from Massachusetts derives from an intensive examination of extant *manuscript sources* related to eighteenth-century military service. The colonial armies of the Revolutionary War produced a prodigious amount of paperwork to document the recruitment, enlistment, organization, and service of the individuals who passed through the ranks. The end result was a an incredible number of muster rolls, pay lists, descriptive rosters, deserter descriptions, and other records that provide names and some degree of personal data about the thousands of men serving in the Revolutionary War. While many of these materials have unfortunately not stood the test of time, the existing paper trail of Massachusetts’s Revolutionary soldiers is perhaps more comprehensive than those of any other state. This is both a boon and a burden to historical inquiry. On the one hand, the records paint a uniquely complete picture of an eighteenth-century society at war. By the same token, the immensity of the existing material makes any kind of systemic analysis of this nature seem daunting, if not hopeless. Fortunately, several manuscript collections and indices exist that allow

Forgotten Fifth (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2006) and Alan Gilbert, *Black Patriots and Loyalists: Fighting for Emancipation in the War for Independence* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2012), xiii. Nash speculates that the 5,000 figure is a low estimate and Gilbert claims “many more blacks fought for the Patriots than historians have heretofore imagined” but neither offers a revised figure.

⁴ Eric G. Grundset, ed., *Forgotten Patriots: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War* (Washington DC: National Society of the Daughters of the American Revolution, 2008).

⁵ There are no reliable estimates of the size of the free black population in eighteenth-century Massachusetts. The census and population returns of 1765 and 1776 make no qualification as to the difference between enslaved and free blacks.

for the level of fine-grain research necessary to trace soldiers of color during the American Revolution.

Primary among these is the seventeen-volume set *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors of the Revolutionary War*. Arranged as an alphabetical index, *Soldiers & Sailors* provides capsule service summaries for each individual soldier appearing in the vast corpus of Revolutionary-era manuscript records held at the Massachusetts State Archives. The Archives holds perhaps the largest collection of Revolutionary-era military records pertaining to Massachusetts soldiers—a compilation both breathtaking in its size and daunting in its complexity. Happily, with more than 175,000 separate entries, *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors* provides a relatively easy avenue into the most impressive and complete catalog of Massachusetts soldiers serving in the American Revolution.⁶

Several collections held by the National Archives and Records Administration function to complement those indexed in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*. For example, the records contained in *Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783* (National Archives Microfilm Compilation M246) and its accompanying index, *Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M881), help fill the gaps in the Massachusetts State Archives manuscript collections. Finally, the *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files* (National Archives Microfilm Publication M804) at the National Archives contain manuscript records submitted by veterans and their families in order to obtain pension benefits offered by the federal government during the nineteenth century. The more than 80,000 pension applications included in this collection contain depositions describing each soldier's military service, lists of personal and real property, records of marriage and other family data, supporting affidavits from character witnesses and local officials, and other supporting documentation. When used in conjunction with eighteenth-century military records, the pension files allow a researcher to compile a reasonably complete portrait of a Revolutionary soldier's wartime experiences.⁷

In addition to these primary materials, two secondary sources were of supreme importance in collecting and analyzing the data related to soldiers of color. The first, George Quintal's *Patriots of Color: "A Peculiar Beauty & Merit,"* documents African and Native soldiers who fought at Battle Road and at Bunker Hill. The second, *Forgotten Soldiers: African American and American Indian Patriots in the Revolutionary War*, represents an impressive effort spearheaded by the Daughters of the American Revolution to examine and catalog every soldier of color known to have served in patriot forces during the American Revolution. The works by Quintal

⁶ *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailor of the Revolutionary War*, 17 vols., (Boston: Wright & Potter Printers, 1904). *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors* serves as an index to the seventy-seven manuscript volumes of *Revolutionary War Rolls, 1763-1835* (SC1/Series 57X) and other related series held at the Massachusetts State Archives. *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors* is available in most public libraries in Massachusetts and is available online in digital format through a number of resources.

⁷ The microfilm publications *Revolutionary War Rolls, 1775-1783* (NARA Microfilm Compilation M246); *Compiled Service Records of Soldiers Who Served in the American Army During the Revolutionary War* (NARA Microfilm Publication M881), and *Revolutionary War Pension and Bounty-Land Warrant Application Files* (NARA Microfilm Publication M804) are available at the National Archives as well as through the genealogy website Fold3.com (subscription required.)

and the DAR offered both leads into new sources and names of soldiers of color as well as an important cross-examination of the names already extracted from existing manuscript sources.⁸

Names of soldiers of color were extracted from these primary and secondary sources using the following methodological strategies:

The first strategy was to search for soldiers with pertinent *Physical Descriptions*. As Benjamin Quarles noted in 1961, the biggest obstacle in ascertaining the ethnic origins of eighteenth-century soldiers is the lack of any racial descriptor in extant manuscript muster rolls. Although eighteenth-century military descriptive lists often include a category listing soldiers' complexion, the lack of any centralized oversight in creating these records means that ambiguities and omissions abound in the documentary material. Nevertheless, the estimated total of 2,100 Massachusetts soldiers of color includes 1,124 individuals who are specifically described in manuscript records using racial terms common to the eighteenth century. These include "negro," "black," "mulatto," and "Indian." Also included in this total are soldiers described as having "yellow" complexions or as having "wool" for a hair color—telling indicators used by eighteenth-century clerks to denote non-European origins.

This strategy is not without its pitfalls and qualifications. The terms most commonly used on manuscript descriptive rolls to describe complexion are "light" and "dark." Occasionally, it seems that military clerks were more concerned with finishing the work assigned to them rather than providing accurate ethnic descriptions of their charges. As such, the term "dark" was employed to describe the complexion of a number of men who can be identified as soldiers of color, such as Joseph Cutt, a 45-year-old soldier from Wilbraham, described by local officials as having "black" hair and a "dark" complexion. After his arrival at West Point in 1779, army clerks inserted the descriptive "Negro" in the complexion column next to his name. Similarly, Michael Pease, a soldier from Nantucket who enlisted in 1777, appears on one descriptive roster with a "dark" complexion and on another with a "black" complexion. One record describes him as a "negro" while another lists his birthplace as Portugal, suggesting the possibility that eighteenth-century military clerks may have conflated Iberian ancestry with African origins. Even more frustratingly, soldiers Chandler Lowder and Peter Root are listed on respective rolls as having "light" complexions but both are later described on other rolls as "Negroes." In total, the estimate of 2,100 soldiers of color includes 145 men described in manuscript military rolls in ambiguous terms.⁹

Finally, it should be noted that the manuscript records indicate that eighteenth-century military clerks placed little concern in abiding by hard-and-fast racial categories. Dozens of individuals appear in different records alternately described as "Negro," "mulatto," or "Indian," such as Benjamin Jeffreys, who is alternately described as an "Indian" and a "negro," or Charles Mingo,

⁸ George Quintal, jr., *Patriots of Color: "A Peculiar Beauty and Merit:" African Americans and Native Americans at Battle Road & Bunker Hill* (Boston: Government Printing Office, 2004) and Grundest, *Forgotten Patriots*.

⁹ For Cutt, Pease, Lowder, and Root, see respective entries in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*. For further discussion of the difficulty in ascertaining soldiers of color based on eighteenth-century physical descriptions, see *Forgotten Patriots*, Appendix B.

a Wrentham man who was described as a “mulatto” when he enlisted for nine months in 1779 and as a “negro” when he returned to the army for six months in 1780.

Names offered another clue in tracking down Massachusetts’s soldiers of color. Whereas Massachusetts men and women of European origin often had names derived from the region’s Biblical origins, people of color in Massachusetts received names drawn from different sources. Oftentimes these names were forcibly adopted, as slave owners renamed their new charges in accordance with their own desires. In other cases, it appears that slaves were granted enough freedom to retain their own names or bestow African names on their children. Nevertheless, the end result is a population that becomes slightly more legible simply through the distinct characteristics of their names. One historian has offered the following categories for use as a rough guide to locating soldiers of color through nomenclature: names of classical origin (e.g. Caesar, Cato), names of African origin (e.g. Quash, Kwaku), place names (e.g. Boston, London, Charlestown), and “status” names (e.g., Freeman, Liberty.)¹⁰

Comparing these categories with those individuals identified through eighteenth-century racial language confirmed the utility of this strategy: almost two hundred men described using as “Negro” in Revolutionary-era military records also had names like Caesar, Cato, Scipio, and Pompey. Perhaps even more tellingly, there are very few examples of non-African men in Massachusetts with names that fall into these four categories. For these reasons, 242 men with names highly indicative of African or Indian origin but with no other racial descriptions are included in the estimate of 2,100 soldiers of color. A further 91 men appear on manuscript military records with names such as Dick, Jack, Tom, or Will. Nicknames or shortened versions of Anglo names were often assigned to enslaved men, and, indeed, several appear in the records described as such, including Dick, a “negro” who enlisted from West Springfield in 1777, and Tom, “a negro” serving in Colonel John Ashley’s regiment in 1780.¹¹

Finally, researchers should bear in mind that an *Estimate* of 2,100 Massachusetts soldiers of color should be understood as a fluid number. Although the manuscript paper trail of Massachusetts’s Revolutionary soldiers is more complete than that of other state, there are a few glaring gaps in the historical record. For example, very few manuscript materials created by Massachusetts regiments serving with the Continental Army during the crucial year of 1776 have survived. Out of the seventeen units raised in Massachusetts that year, complete sets of rolls listing individual soldiers’ names exist for only five regiments. In other words, almost two-thirds of the approximately 8,000 Massachusetts soldiers serving during 1776 remain unknown. Records of the ten Massachusetts regiments serving with the Continental Army at the close of the war are similarly incomplete. Full manuscript rolls exist for only four different regiments,

¹⁰ Debra L. Newman, *List of Black Servicemen Compiled from the War Department Collection of Revolutionary War Records* (Washington DC: National Archives and Records Service, 1974), pp. 1-2. For further discussion of names as indicators of soldier’s origins, see Quintal, p. 17 and *Forgotten Patriots*, Appendix C.

¹¹ One important exception to this rule is Africa Hamlin, a soldier and officer from Pembroke. Africa’s father named each of his sons after a different continent, ensuring that Africa and his brothers Europe, Asia, and America Hamlin would confuse historians for generations to come. See Charles Eugene Hamlin, *The Life and Times of Hannibal Hamlin* (Cambridge, Riverside Press, 1899), pp. 8-10.

making it extremely difficult to track the military service of more than half of the roughly 4,000 Massachusetts soldiers serving in the Continental Army between 1781 and 1783.¹²

These gaps in the military record leave a conspicuous hole in any estimates of the total soldiers of color from Massachusetts. In 1776, one contemporary observer specifically noted that Colonel John Glover's regiment contained "a number of negroes" among its soldiers. Similarly, a "Return of deserters" from Colonel William Bond's regiment dated July 11, 1776 lists Peter Norwood and Ephraim Frost—both described as "Negro"—among the soldiers serving with the regiment. Likewise, the lack of a sustained number of military records for the latter part of the Revolutionary War make it difficult to track African and Indian service in the Continental Army during a period when existing manuscript records indicate the presence of men of color in the ranks expanded dramatically.¹³

Even once located in the manuscript records, determining the *Legal Status* of soldiers of color remains problematic. In general, military records only infrequently mention the legal status of a soldier of color. The term "slave" appears rarely in period military records. For example, out of hundreds of soldiers of color serving in Massachusetts regiments in 1775, only two—Aesop Harden and Adonis Harden—were specifically described as "negro slaves" on extant manuscript muster rolls. Instead, slave owners in eighteenth-century Massachusetts were far more likely to use the term "servant" to refer to enslaved peoples. Unfortunately, in eighteenth-century military parlance, the term "servant" was used to describe soldiers acting as an officer's valet and was rarely used to denote any kind of chattel slavery. Thus, in 1781, Andrew Webster, a white soldier in the 7th Massachusetts Regiments, is listed as an "officer's servant" at the same time Prince Soward, a black soldier in the same regiment, appears as a "servant to Major [Samuel] Darby."¹⁴

It might be tempting to assume that those soldiers of color who appear in the manuscript records with a surname were freemen, but this is not always the case. For example, Continental Army muster rolls indicate that Cuffey or Cuff Townsend, described as a "negro" baker from Boston, enlisted in Colonel Thomas Marshall's regiment on January 6, 1777. Townsend continued to

¹² Records of 1776 service for Loammi Baldwin's, Edmund Phinney's, Thomas Nixon's, and Asa Whitcomb's regiments are at the Massachusetts State Archives and indexed in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*. Rolls for John Bailey's regiment are in M246 and indexed in M881. Miscellaneous rolls exist for some companies in Moses Little's, Joseph Read's, John Paterson's, Paul Dudley Sargent's, William Bond's, Israel Hutchinson's, and Henry Knox's regiments and can be found in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, M246, and in various other manuscript repositories. For example, some rolls for Henry Knox's artillery regiment are in the Gilder Lehrman Collection, NYHS. There are no extant rolls for Ebenezer Learned's, William Prescott's, John Glover's, Jonathan Ward's, or John Groaton's regiments of 1776. For the regiment of 1781, records for the 1st, 3rd, 4th, and 7th Massachusetts Regiments are in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors* and in M246. Rolls for the 2d, 5th, 6th, 8th, 9th, and 10th Massachusetts Regiments are fragmentary or otherwise non-existent.

¹³ Alexander Graydon, *Memoirs of His Own Time. With Reminiscences of the Men and Events of the Revolution* (Philadelphia: Lindsay & Blakiston, 1846), p. 149. "Return of Deserters from Col. Wm. Bonds Regt. since Jan 1 1776," in the William Bond Papers, 1768-1777, Mss 80, Mandeville Special Collections Library, University of California-San Diego. Peter Norwood and Ephraim Frost do not appear in any of the rolls indexed in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, in National Archives Microfilm Publications M246, M801, or M881, or in *Forgotten Patriots*.

¹⁴ Aesop and Adonis served eight months in Colonel Timothy Walker's regiment in 1775. See *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 7, p. 251. For Andrew Webster and Prince Soward, see respective entries in *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors* and *Forgotten Patriots*, p. 26.

serve with the regiment until his death on June 25, 1778, probably while stationed at Valley Forge. The abundant number of documents on which his name appears—at least five different muster rolls and other military records—offer no indication that this soldier was an enslaved man. But in 1779, his owner, Isaac Townsend, submitted an order requesting any money that remained due to Cuff at the time of his death. Similarly, Asher Wood and Eber Wood, soldiers in Colonel Benjamin Woodbridge's regiment at the battle of Bunker Hill, are not denoted as slaves in any extant military records. Only their owner's petition to the state legislature requesting compensation for their service reveals their enslaved status. Nor can we assume that black soldiers with no surname were always slaves: a 1778 list of men soldiers from the town of Lancaster includes Peter and Reuben, both listed as "free negroes."¹⁵

¹⁵For Cuff Townsend, see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 15, p. 926. Isaac Townsend's petition is in *Orders and Warrants for depreciation notes for service in the Continental Army, 1780-1792* (SC1/Series 58X), files for the 10th Massachusetts Regiment. For Asher and Eber Wood, see *Massachusetts Soldiers & Sailors*, v. 13, p. 120, 238, Quintal, pp. 221, 226 and Elisha Allis's petition for reimbursement in *Massachusetts Archives Collection* (SC1/Series 45X), v. 180, p. 219.